

## Consumer Vulnerability: Critical Insights from Stories, Action Research and Visual Culture

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### Introduction

Critical marketing scholars have been encouraged to consider the experiences of consumers who encounter marketplace exclusion, consumers “whose views are rarely heard by those in positions of power” (Tadajewski, 2010, p. 214). Our focus in this chapter is on consumers experiencing vulnerability. Baker et al. (2005, p. 134) offer the following definition of consumer vulnerability: “[c]onsumer vulnerability is a state of powerlessness that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions or from the consumption of marketing messages and products. It occurs when control is not in an individual’s hands, creating a dependence on external factors (e.g. marketers) to create fairness in the marketplace. The actual vulnerability arises from the *interaction* of individual states, individual characteristics, and external conditions within a context where consumption goals may be hindered and the experience affects personal and social perceptions of self.” Central to Baker et al.’s (2005) definition is the lack of control and power experienced by some consumers, but also that the experience of vulnerability is often heightened due to circumstances beyond the individual’s control (e.g. how other people respond to her/him). This point emphasises the socially constructed and interactive nature of consumer vulnerability. Since the 1990s the importance of consumer vulnerability has been recognised with research exploring its conditions and contexts (Smith and Cooper-Martin, 1997; Gentry et al, 1994; Hill & Stamey, 1990; Ozanne et al, 1998; Morgan et al, 1995; Botti et al, 2008; Schultz et al, 2009; Ozanne & Ozanne, 2011; Cartwright, 2015). This work has been published in a range of outlets, including special issues of *Journal of Macromarketing* (Hill, 2005) and *Journal of Marketing Management* (Dunnett, Hamilton and Piacentini, 2016) and an edited collection (Hamilton, Dunnett and Piacentini, 2016). Much of this research stream questions and problematizes experiences of vulnerability within the marketplace.

Critical marketers have put forward contrasting opinions about the link between a critical marketing perspective and marketing practice. For Bradshaw and Firat (2007, p. 40), critical marketing should be about the empowerment of consumers so “that they be masters of their institutions rather than simply be served by them.” In this sense, critical marketing is less about relevance to marketing managers and more about “question[ing] the very foundation[s] of marketing’s existence” (p. 31). In contrast, Tadajewski (2010) argues that critical marketers should be concerned with engaging with practice and working with both for-profit and non-profit organisations. We argue that such engagement is crucial within the context of consumer vulnerability. As Stearn (2016, p. 66) suggests, “changes in the behaviour of the companies providing essential goods and services and their regulators is as important as developing the ‘empowered’ behaviour of consumers in vulnerable situations.”

Consumer vulnerability is a broad and multi-faceted concept, which has led to a variety of research approaches. Specifically Baker et al. (2015) identify three commonly used analytical perspectives: (1) isolating particular populations of people, for example, studies have focused on socioeconomic status (Hill 2001) and literacy (Atkins and Ozanne 2005); (2) isolating particular environmental conditions, for example, studies have focused on ghettoised neighbourhoods (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004) and natural disasters (Sayre 1994) and; (3) isolating meanings and processes of vulnerability, an approach which highlights the dynamic nature of consumer vulnerability. For example, Baker and Mason (2012) suggest that vulnerability can be a catalyst for change. Where researchers find common ground is their acknowledgement that researching consumer vulnerability requires careful methodological consideration with techniques that are appropriate for sensitive topics in challenging contexts (e.g. Hill 1995, Turley, 2015). However, this need not create a barrier to methodological innovation, with many recent studies adopting creative approaches to consumer vulnerability analysis. We suggest that

these methods have much potential, in particular for unpacking and exposing consumer vulnerability, and, in turn, laying the groundwork for transformative resolutions. In this chapter, we review consumer vulnerability studies that have drawn on non-conventional methods and, in doing so, have enriched our critical understanding of the concept.

In order to do so we open with a discussion of the role and position of context in the field of consumer vulnerability. We touch briefly on the relationship between contexts, theory and representation in order to critically examine the ways context has been viewed in consumer research more widely, particularly harnessing recent debates in the field of Consumer Culture Theory. We then move on to discuss methodologies that offer unique types of access to, and engagement with, vulnerable consumers as informants and participants. First we consider stories (such as autobiographies) as sources of data and mechanisms of representation, we then consider the merits of action research and participant involvement and finally we outline the benefits of a visual, filmic sensibility in studies of consumer vulnerability.

### **The role of context**

Studies of consumer vulnerability often differ from those in the wider field of consumer research in their treatment of context. For consumer vulnerability researchers, the context is the subject or focus of the study and can be the driver for transformation or impact as well as theoretical contribution. This perspective provides a contrast to wider consumer research, which emphasises that studies are not simply of their context but rather make use of contexts for purposes of theory development. In their 2006 paper, Arnould et al discuss what they term the dangers of contexts, chief among these that context may overshadow the theoretical insights on offer; '[c]ontexts are dangerous not only for the way they threaten to swallow researchers, but for the way contexts can overabsorb our readers' (p. 1090). For the most part, consumer vulnerability studies do not aim to make "use of" research contexts but rather work with and in contexts to affect positive change. Indeed, it is central to work conducted in the field of consumer vulnerability that it is contextualised, and that it offers an insight into a population, phenomenon or a feature of the marketplace. Therefore context remains deliberately in the foreground and research questions are often framed in terms of consumer welfare and lives in context, e.g. disability studies (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999), studies of poverty (Hamilton, 2012) and homelessness (Hill & Stamey, 1990). How far to move from this context in terms of theorisation, or an etic view, can be both an intellectual challenge and a moral one for the researcher. Sure enough the balance between context and theory, emic (participant voice) and etic (theoretical insight) must be struck, and the required balance will differ across journals and other outlets. Yet a common goal of this type of work is that it "give voice" to the unseen challenges of under-represented populations. Representation is therefore the aim rather than abstraction. Such a goal can often seem incommensurate with an academic culture that builds legitimacy on the sociological tradition of "grand theorisation on a more aggregate level" (Askegaard and Linnet 2011, p. 397).

Of course, theorising legitimises stories for academic audiences, but as we have found in our work with practitioners, it excludes other audiences. This is more than an issue of using the right mode of communication for the right audience. We should recognise that theorisation is always a re-telling of the stories and experiences of others; to theorise a story is to shape it and wield power over it. Merton, writing in the 1970s, suggests that the conceptual frameworks of sociology "serve to exclude from the attention of the social scientist the intense feelings of pain and suffering that are the experience of some people caught up in the social patterns under examination. By screening out these profoundly human experiences, they become sociological euphemisms" (1972, p.38).

Little wonder then that we see much work in the field – including our own – which brings an agentic, neoliberal perspective (Fitchett et al, 2014) to the study of vulnerable consumers, focusing on how

consumers cope despite their vulnerable states. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), in particular, has been charged with viewing the majority of consumers as “navigating [their] way through the plethora of opportunities provided by the marketplace” (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011, p. 383). In contrast our data often speaks of difficult lives and un-solvable problems – the lives of vulnerable consumers are, in general, contexts of constraints rather than possibilities (Moisander et al, 2009; Kazeminia et al, 2015; Beudaert et al, 2017).

There are further conflicts and contradictions when we consider the role of context to research aims. In the CCT tradition, Arnould et al (2006, p.108) suggest that distance aids the construction of theoretical insights: “distance is needed to uncover theoretical contributions and get on with the crafting of science.” Yet Hill (2016, p368) cautions us that to comprehend intractable problems like poverty, “we can not understand their circumstances” without getting close to those circumstances and building a deep understanding of contexts, over time.

A move away from the view that instances of consumer vulnerability represent a case exemplar of an unusual phenomenon would go some way to ensuring that consumer research is an inclusive discipline in terms of the lives it represents. So, rather unfashionably, we propose a return to contexts. Not simply the *‘how to make contexts work for you’*, model (Arnould et al. 2006) but one which can provide a wider representation of consumers. Further research spanning the social boundaries between researcher and context is needed e.g. social class, income, education (Hamilton, 2012, Hill et al 2015, Piacentini et al 2014, Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013). Such studies offer an opportunity to counter the “heavy bias of the American middle-class in our understanding of consumer culture” (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). Arguably it is easier to collect data in and theorise our own worlds and perhaps this meets the needs of our business schools more readily. Certainly our individual biographies shape research relations, and knowledge construction is embedded in these biographies (Griffith, 1998). Yet Hill (2016) points to routes to affect change – his central message is that the “beliefs and behaviours of impoverished citizens can be markedly different from affluent citizens because of the contexts and restrictions they face” (p. 368). Studies in vulnerability have much to offer consumer culture theory and critical marketing and vice versa, not least a move beyond the agentic, middle-class, American individual to explore a variety of contexts and the macro-social frameworks that shape them. The goal outlined of the influential Askegaard and Linnet (2011) paper – to develop a contextually oriented CCT research – can be served by contextualised consumer vulnerability studies. Below we outline three methodological approaches that work to both unearth the micro lived experience and the wider macro politics at play in the lives of vulnerable consumers.

### **Consumer Vulnerability and Stories**

Here we look at the ways stories have been used as both data and to represent findings. Stories can offer a form of proximity to the lived experience that may not be achievable through other means. As Hill (2016) reminds us: ‘we need to get proximal’ in order to have any chance of understanding complex conditions - such as entrenched poverty – and to move beyond understanding to work towards societal change.

Stories differ from data collected through traditional marketing research techniques in that they are completely told from the viewpoint of the teller. They are therefore free from some of the biases created by the research setting, types of questioning and the fragmentation of data analysis. Stories privilege the emic viewpoint and provide rich experiential knowledge (Brown 2005). They are particularly valuable in their communication of emotion, both as data and as a mode of representing findings. In short, stories allow us to see a phenomenon through the eyes of the writer, and in the telling the condition becomes personified – poverty is no longer an intractable social problem but is the context for a life (Sajovic and Kenningham, 2014).

## Stories as data

In considering stories as data this chapter will draw on two examples, firstly the work of Stephanie O'Donohoe and Darach Turley and secondly the recent commentary by Tim Stone and Stephen Gould (2016).

Using stories found in the public domain – such as autobiography - offers a way of sensitively accessing difficult human experiences and deep emotions. This has been done particularly well by Stephanie O'Donohoe and Darach Turley in their work on bereavement and grief. Turley and O'Donohoe (2012) explore the connectedness of possessions – “things” - and bereavement using autobiography or pathographies as a data source. They describe pathography as a ‘personal and often poignant account of illness, dying or bereavement’ (2012, p. 1336). They note that these stories offer detailed accounts of consumer experience - consumption, objects and market interactions are woven into the narrative, just as they are woven into life. Arguably, autobiography or pathography offers the researcher a more frank and arresting glimpse into the pain of loss than other methods, such as interview, might garner. Pathographies capture the mundane detail of life alongside deep introspection. They are crafted stories that make the unfamiliar familiar and the private public. As Brown (2005) reminds us, autobiography allows us to reach elements of an experience or phenomenon that other research techniques may not.

O'Donohoe (2015) extends this technique to explore the experience of childhood grief through an analysis of a memoir written by Ben Brooks-Dutton following his wife's death. O'Donohoe (2015) considers the role of consumption and consumer culture in Brooks-Dutton's toddler son's life after the death of his mother. This method allows for insights to “emerge organically as part of a story being told for other purposes, highlighting the seamless and salient nature of consumption in vulnerable people's lives” (p.100). Again, O'Donohoe is concerned with our relationship to possessions and the role that these possessions play in grieving and loss. Indeed O'Donohoe shows that trivial and mundane objects can be central to the grieving process for both adults and very young children. It seems hard to imagine uncovering such insights through the traditional research encounter, not least because it is challenging to discuss seemingly inconsequential everyday consumption in the shadow of loss. Yet O'Donohoe and Turley's work with autobiographies as data shows us the rewards of sensitivity and compassionately applying the consumer lens to profound human experiences. In particular the work on toddler grief and the role of possessions has been shared with the support agency Greif Encounter.

Also working with stories, Stone and Gould (2016) draw on an account of Sandra Bem published in the *New York Times* detailing her decision to commit suicide following a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. They consider her decision to “navigate the market for suitable goods and services in order to bring about a self-determined end to her life” (p. 386). Their work is notable for its combination of sensitivity to the individuals and sources featured and the use of a powerful theoretical lens – they use terror management theory to theorise the rationale of ending one's life and the practicalities of doing so. It reminds us that telling stories need not be (and often, *should* not be) an entirely emic undertaking, and yet theory need not obliterate the ideographic lived experience. Their framing of Sandra's experience as a form of consumption allows the reader to see both the ordinariness (shopping for the wherewithal) and the extraordinariness (the power and presence of mind with which she approaches the decision and the task) of the practices of ending one's own life. Flying in the face of the assertion that “informants' plights can overwhelm scientific goals” (Arnould et al 2006, p. 109), they allow Sandra's story to offer a critique of depictions of elderly consumers that overlook the less agentic, frail “fourth age” and end of life.

This source of secondary data, which contained both Sandra's voice and that of her husband, allowed investigation of a phenomenon that would otherwise be near impossible to access. Using existing texts gives us admission to accounts of raw emotion and embodied life that offer deep understanding of

hidden experience. The beauty of this approach is its sensitivity, particularly in contexts where the presence of a researcher could be intrusive or unethical. Indeed using secondary sources as data removes much of the potential harm of the research encounter and can redress the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched (Jafari et al 2013). Achieving access to sensitive contexts and informants can be a barrier to studies of consumer vulnerability, the above shows there are ways of accessing profound, unseen experience through autobiography and media interview.

### Stories as representation

In order to explore the use of stories as representation we turn now to the poet-researcher to consider what the poetic form offers the field of consumer vulnerability.

For some time now poetry has been legitimised in the field of consumer research as an alternative mode of representation (Canniford 2012, Downey 2016, Sherry and Schouten 2002, Wijland 2011). As Downey (2016) points out, the 'poet-researcher' sits well in the often emotive field of consumer vulnerability. Poetry provides a uniquely visceral and immediate form through which to recount the emotion in the research encounter and forms an excellent tool to aid reflexivity and data analysis (Canniford 2012). Hilary Downey, in particular, (2016:358) demonstrates the potential of poetry to offer a release for "hidden narratives" that otherwise, might remain absent in more conventional academic outputs. Downey's (2016) recent poem stems from a two year research relationship with a homebound consumer and effectively brings various themes to the fore including physical bodily constraints, emotional reactions, sense of marginalisation, relationships with others (including carers) and the spatial surroundings (hospital, bedroom).

As a tool of representation, poetry explicitly acknowledges that it is a *reaction to* the lives of others not a retelling. The pain and suffering seen and felt are written into the account. Researchers who use stories to represent contexts weave themselves into the story. The storyteller is off-stage but their presence is strongly felt. The poem offers an attempt to weld these world views together giving insight into the experience of vulnerability and the researcher's, sometimes visceral, reaction to the context. The role of the researcher in shaping stories – in creating feeling - is perhaps more explicit here than might be in prose. As Downey observes, poetry offers a "heady mix of sensory imagery, emotionally laden observations" (2016, p. 361). The reader is drawn in, asked to decode the imagery, and in this decoding are made to feel some of what has been felt by participant and researcher both. The poem *Vulnerability in Parts* attempts to capture the experience of quadriplegic man, Jay:

"Floating seamlessly atop the skin-like,

Dreamlike stretched reality, frighteningly stilled

On a still body; the something I can be

Made all the more chilling by ceding

Control at the brink;" (ibid p 362).

Thus the power of Downey's poetry is its evocation of the emotional connection between researcher and researched. It does this through style, expression, imagery, cadence - poetry serves to "unfix" the language conventions of traditional representations seen in academic research (Canniford 2012: 393).

Indeed, Canniford (2012) makes the case for the use of poetry in data analysis, to represent the ethnographic encounter through both poetic field notes and data interpretation. Its value here is to capture feelings, atmosphere, preliminary interpretations and fleeting thoughts such that they can be revisited. In this way, poetry is not simply an end point but process as well. In the hands of Downey, Canniford and others, poetry offers a chance to break out of the traditions of academic

representations and take us closer to the feel, the sights, the spaces, and the experience of consumer vulnerability.

Narrative, as Visconti (2016) points out, is absorbing, convincing and memorable; whether veiled in poetry or recounted in prose the story gives voice to the vulnerable. Exploring the phenomenon of vulnerability from a conversational perspective Visconti (2016) reminds us that stories can be powerful mechanisms of change. He contends that, “individual and social conversations on, among others, ethnic and gender diversity, illness, and poverty are powerful transformative means to subvert established positions of domination” (ibid, p. 372). He notes that “etic social representations tend to flatten vulnerable consumers to a whole, relatively homogeneous group of like-minded and like-acting individuals” (ibid, p. 377). Emic social representations, instead, are bolder in documenting pluralism and difference within vulnerable consumer groups. Visconti too is concerned with notions of proximity and empathy: “it is easier to reject a faceless group than people with names and stories.” (ibid, p. 377).

Poetic and narrative representation offer a very good fit with the goals of most transformative research or studies of consumer vulnerability - stories inform, uncover hidden contexts and people, give voice, capture and share emotion and create empathy. Stories, then, are powerful tools of persuasion and can be used as catalysts for change.

The use of stories presents several methodological challenges for the researcher. As in all qualitative research, questions of viewpoint must be considered critically – whose viewpoint is being rendered and why, whose interests are served by the story? Narrative analysis technique (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) can reveal how tellers position and characterise themselves in their stories e.g. hero, victim, questing traveller, revealing what type of story is being told. Unlike observation techniques, such as ethnography, which can reveal unconscious, disordered behaviour and counter intuitive insights, stories-as-data present honed and crafted artefacts that the researcher must unpick. Narratives are often immediate and persuasive, the temptation to take them at face value should be avoided and a critical perspective adopted, particularly in their analysis. As the above scholars show, a robust analytical lens or theoretical framework need not obliterate the narrative voice but can instead draw out insight from lengthy, subjective texts such as autobiography or media interview.

Studies of vulnerability that use autobiography or poetry, should consider the cultural context in which they were written, including the personal history of the writer and main “characters”. The aspects of the context such geographical location, historical or political setting, legal and ethical issues and relevant consumer cultures should inform the treatment of the data and ideally should be considered in subsequent publications. It is worth remembering that in telling stories “people are seen as composing lives that shape and are shaped by social and cultural narratives” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 43).

At first glance it may seem difficult to find space for alternative forms of representation - such as poetry or narrative - in our publications, yet journals such as *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Marketing Theory* and *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* have featured poetic work alongside discussions of the poet-researcher and Special Issues continue to offer opportunities for stories to be told.

### **Consumer vulnerability and action research**

Recent attention in the Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) field has turned towards embracing the methodological approaches captured by the term action research. Action research refers to a family of qualitative research methodologies, which are characterised by being iterative, participative and reflective. Developed post WWII, the driver for this approach was a general concern with how social change could be facilitated, and Lewin’s early work (1951) was instrumental in guiding how the field evolved. Action research approaches are responsive to the research situation, and tend to be emergent and flexible (Dick, 2000). Members of the family of action research approaches include such

methodologies as participatory action research, action learning, action science and soft systems approaches. Action research, in various forms, has been widely used in applied social science contexts (Nyman et al, 2016; Kidd et al, 2014), particularly in the organisational and educational sectors (Edward-Groves and Kimmis, 2016; Dey et al, 2015), and has been the methodological approach adopted in a number of recent studies with vulnerable groups of the population (for example, Clough, 2015; Hill et al, 2016; Ozanne and Anderson, 2010).

An action research project will usually have 6 key stages, involving analysis, evidence/fact gathering, conceptualization, planning, implementation of action, and evaluation (Baskerville et al, 1996). Although action research is typically considered a qualitative methodology, it does not rule out the use of quantitative methods for evaluatory purposes; however the requirement to be adaptive and responsive in support of successive iterations means that qualitative methods are more commonly used. It is common to use fuzzy and heuristic methods early in the conduct of action research to allow for quick refinement of approaches and methods.

A key attraction of action research for consumer research lies with the emergent nature of the approach. This lends itself effectively to contexts where organisational and individual change is a key aim, and this includes any attempts to modify consumer behaviour. A large-scale example of this was a European study of energy behaviour change (Feenstra et al, 2009). In this work, Feenstra and colleagues undertook a depth analysis of 27 European energy demand management programmes, and from this developed a toolkit for practitioners to use to improve the outcomes of energy change programmes. The key point here is that the toolkit to enhance the practical implementation of energy behavioural change initiatives was developed based on an emergent design from analysis of existing programmes and literature.

A further advantage for consumer and marketing research is that action research is relevant to the lives of the participants and empowers them. This engenders greater engagement in participants. The work by Clough (2015) exemplifies this point, where he adopted a Participatory Action Research approach to explore the range and types of services and facilities available to older people, and how these might support them to lead fuller lives. In Clough's study, the older people at the centre of the project were involved as researchers, interviewers and commentators on the emergent findings - the research participants are not merely passive but actively involved in the research process. This has both advantages and disadvantages. While the involvement of communities of interest in all stages of the research has clear benefits in terms of representation of those voices, there are downsides linked to their status as first and foremost representatives of that community, rather than as researchers investigating a specific research problem. As Clough notes, a participant with short-term training may well be less effective and efficient as a researcher, and any assumption that there are labour and time savings in this approach could be misplaced.

This empowerment and greater engagement is further enhanced by the ways in which action research breaks down hierarchies and opens up dialogue between participants and researchers (Hill, Cunningham and the Gramercy Gentlemen, 2016). In the context of a maximum security prison, Hill et al (2016) adopted a participatory action research approach to give voice to their participants (incarcerated men), and to open up conversations about their lives in order to develop insights about the acquisition and ownership restrictions they face. In their paper, the voices of the men are clearly incorporated as research data as informants (which is expected in qualitative research) but also as inmate co-researchers, where they are in the unique position of providing insights as investigators of their own community, as well as representing the community. The following data excerpt is typical from this work:

Base pay a month for an inmate is usually between \$19.00 and \$55.40. If the inmate has cable, \$16.50 is automatically deducted from his account, as is any owed medical costs (they

may not be aware of). The average income for an inmate with no outside support is a subsistence of extreme poverty—so medical costs affect them greatly. The income we earn has not increased in decades, though costs all around us have. Poor care for profit or the little income prisoners have causes resentment. (Inmate co-researcher no. 10) (Hill et al, 2016, p306).

For this work, research participants' included to the point of being co-authors on the written work relating to this study, as the Gramercy Gentlemen (Hill et al, 2016)

As a result of these effects another attraction emerges: action research has ethical advantages in that it centres on the needs of participants and is democratic, accountable and, if properly conducted, life-enhancing. Action research often centres on community engagement and empowerment, with a view to encouraging participants to actively develop interventions that will help their lives. According to Ozanne and Anderson (2010), community-based action research emphasises the role of multiple participants from a community, often focusing on improving people's well being, especially where they are disadvantaged or vulnerable in some way. The interventionist approach so central to action research clearly fits with the TCR agenda, where improving people's lives is a driving concern (Mick, 2008). However, this approach does not always neatly fit the broader context of academic research, and the key message with the action research approach is to keep in mind that "good" action research has both practical and academic outcomes. The balance between these varies according to context and project aims – sometimes the practical outcomes outweigh the academic outcomes, and vice versa. The role of theory can be contentious here – rigorous academic theory may be impractical or impossible to implement. Practitioner participants may not have rigorous theoretical knowledge but may use implicit theories that are highly effective (Ozanne and Saatcioglu, 2008). As applied research, action research can seem frustrating in that it does not seek to offer general solutions outside the study context, which can be antithetical to some researchers, especially of a positivistic or experimental disposition (Wansink, 2012).

Another key consideration around action research use relates to its resource implications. Project funding and timescales often do not allow for extensive iteration, and it is not uncommon to find action research projects that never actually manage to engage fully with later cycles of development. Gaining the trust of participants takes time and researchers need to be prepared to take a less central and controlling role, even to the extent of a complete reversal of leadership at some stages in a project (Hill et al, 2016). However, in the context of working with vulnerable populations, the action research approach brings important benefits, which outweigh possible downsides.

There are a number of methodological challenges associated with action research approaches. The first links to the role of the 'participant as researcher'; how does becoming an active research participant (involved in all stages of the research) shift and impact on the participant as a study informant? Action research is by definition participative, and through participation, study participants occupy a role as both researcher and the implementer of the programme or action being investigated. Participants are also co-constructors of the data, who can facilitate access to and understanding of the socio-cultural context of the research (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Burawoy, 1998). These dual roles can provide a heightened sense of ownership of the action program, but also raise questions about the legitimacy of the researcher among the various stakeholders and those being researched. From a methodological point of view, it is important that researcher reflection and encouragement towards critical subjectivity (Ladkin, 2007) are factored into the programme of action research.

Second, the applied nature of much action research raises the issue of emic-etic balance in terms of the research outcomes. This stems from the very advantage of the action research approach (some form of intervention within a specific context), which also serves as a limitation – the findings and contribution are often very context bound, and therefore it is difficult to get the balance of theory and



empirical data unpacked to the extent to that wider relevance and contributions can be noted. While this is an important aspect of the action research approach, this question is one that concerns many qualitative and post-positivist researchers more generally (Payne and Williams, 2005), and certainly not exclusive to action research approaches.

Finally, action research operating at a community level represents challenges in gaining access to all stakeholders in a community, issues of power imbalances in a community, and ensuring all voices are heard. The idea of comprehensive coverage of the community of interest is going to be influenced by local politics and power relations, which may facilitate but may also hinder access to key community members.

### **Consumer Vulnerability and Visual Culture**

Visual culture surrounds us on a daily basis and recent years have seen marketing and consumer researchers embrace the visual turn as they employ visual forms of analysis and dissemination. In this section we consider what a visual approach can bring to our critical understanding of consumer vulnerability. We begin with a discussion of consumer vulnerability research that has used existing visual resources as the basis of analysis and then consider examples of researchers who have collected and produced visuals themselves.

Chase and Walker (2016) consider global experiences of poverty and shame across seven countries - Britain, Norway, India, Uganda, China, South Korea and Pakistan. They draw on a range of data collection techniques including analysis of representations of poverty in film and literature in the different cultural contexts. Although recognising shifting attitudes towards consumerism over time, a common theme across countries was the need for impression management to “keep up appearances” and how those experiencing poverty felt at risk of judgement from others. Interestingly, their interviews revealed synergies with these fictional accounts, demonstrating how films, short stories and poetry can be important resources for obtaining insight about experiences of vulnerability with reference to a particular cultural and historical context.

The mass media is a dominant agent in transmitting knowledge and shaping our cultural frameworks (Jansson, 2002) yet the media can commoditise the vulnerable “other” (Coleman, 2016, p. 46). Coleman (2016) considers the documentary, as “a media commodity working within market-based logic” (p.48). Her focus is on *The Uncondemned*, a documentary part financed by a crowdfunding campaign, which includes accounts of women who testified at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda to help secure the first successful prosecutions of rape and sexual violence as crimes of war. The documentary publicly discloses the women’s identities, which were concealed during the trials, and “is named to present the story of transition from vulnerability toward empowerment through voice” (p. 50). Drawing on Adichie’s (2009) warning about “the danger of the single story,” Coleman suggests that the women’s narratives in the tribunal records are only one telling of their experiences and highlights the potential of *The Uncondemned* to complement this perspective and stimulate broader conversations about sexual violence. Given the constructed nature of documentaries, and the power dynamics at play, Coleman reminds us of the need to maintain a critical and reflective stance towards the consumption of representations.

The need for a critical reading of representations is in keeping with Social Representations Theory (SRT) which has recently been proposed as a useful approach to identify and challenge dominant representations that stigmatise by reframing one-dimensional perceptions of vulnerability (Hamilton et al. 2014). Referring to the context of poverty, Hamilton et al. (2014, p. 1849) suggests that representations have transformative potential “to provoke change in those representations that lead to social exclusion, thereby affecting how people in poverty both are viewed and view themselves.”

By replacing poverty with other states of vulnerability, we could make the same argument. Vulnerability is a multi-faceted concept (Baker et al. 2016) and one-dimensional views of its various states - poverty, illness, aging, grief etc. – risk oversimplifying consumer experiences. Dominant discourses are often disempowering because they exclude the voices of those with first-hand experience of vulnerability whereas more transformative discourses prioritize the voice of lived experience (Hamilton et al. 2014).

Visual approaches that adopt a participatory approach are one means of giving more emphasis to the voices of consumers experiencing vulnerability. One recent example is Chatzidakis and Maclaran's (2016) film, "Skoros: Anti-consumption in crisis," which features an anti-consumption collective and was produced and filmed almost entirely by members of the collective. Their involvement ensures that the emic perspective of the collective is portrayed in terms of their experiences of the "crisis" which has forced many consumers into poverty. This film is reminiscent of Bradshaw and Firat's (2007, p. 40) suggestion that a critical marketing orientation can "inspire transformations that would empower people to shed their identities as consumers to perform a takeover of organizations and marketing to control and run them for their purposes."

Since the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) Film Festival began in 2001, videography has gained popularity as a useful approach to disseminating research findings. Here, we consider several films that are based on contexts relevant to the study of consumer vulnerability. We begin with Caldwell and Henry's (2007), "A right to life: reducing maternal death in Pakistan," as a powerful example. Pakistan has high maternal death and morbidity statistics and the film highlights the vulnerability of women within a cultural context where family units are characterised by patriarchy and women have limited education and poor literacy skills. Shockingly there is an acceptance of women's death, particularly women living in poverty, and the film brings much-needed attention to an issue that for many remains under the radar. Featuring activists who highlight the need for the empowerment of women, the film puts forward a powerful critique of government support of the existing health care system.

Another film which also highlights the need for change is Caldwell, Kleppe and Watson's (2010) "Walk the talk: Living positive with HIV." Filmed in Botswana, this example centres on a pageant for men who are willing to go public with their HIV/Aids status and engage in public advocacy for positive living by encouraging others to get tested and promoting safe sex. The decision to enter the pageant is particularly significant because the cultural norm, particularly for men, is not to expose their HIV status for fear of discrimination or stigmatisation. Similar to the previous example, this film raises awareness of an issue that often remains outside of public discourse and puts forward a powerful message about the need for behaviour and lifestyle changes.

In reflecting on the two films discussed above, we suggest that there are various benefits of employing videography as a means of disseminating research findings of studies linked to consumer vulnerability. First, Films are a useful means of learning about experiences of vulnerability in different cultural contexts and allowing viewers to see cultural traditions and rituals that may be unfamiliar to them. For example, in both films we learn about traditional health care methods that sharply contrast with Western medicine. Here we recall Moscovici (1984, p. 24) who suggests that "the purpose of all representations is to make the unfamiliar, or unfamiliarity itself, familiar." Films not only allow us to witness the lived experience of consumer vulnerability but to situate this within the "context of context" (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). Becoming sensitive to the structuring influences that constrain consumers or enhance their vulnerability is an essential stage in developing a critical understanding of their lives.

Second, such films have the potential for intense emotional impact. Although we could read about the same themes in more traditional academic outlets, experiences of vulnerability take on greater immediacy when we see them visually. The need for change is undeniable when we see with our own eyes the poor infrastructural conditions, low quality medical facilities which have a shortage of drugs and other supplies and the tears of family members who have lost loved ones to complications during childbirth (Watson et al. 2007) or people talking about the diagnosis and treatment of HIV (Caldwell and Kleppe, 2010).

Third, critical marketing often involves a focus on societal issues (Schroeder, 2007) and this is certainly evident in the films discussed above. Both feature ambassadors of change who are committed to improving the health and well-being of consumers experiencing vulnerability and both have the potential to feed into social marketing campaigns. The film format is particularly appropriate because of its potential to reach a large audience, including those stakeholders who have the resources to instigate and promote behaviour changes that will reduce consumer vulnerability.

Fourth, reaching a broad audience is also advantageous in the sense that these films raise the profile of experiences of vulnerability of which there is little awareness. They therefore serve an important role in giving voice to aspects of vulnerability that otherwise may remain hidden. Another relevant example in this regard is Veer's (2014) "I'm Struggling, Men's Stories of Mental Illness" which reveals the fear and shame experienced by men whose notions of masculinity have been compromised because of their mental health illnesses. It is only by making such issues visible that transformation can occur and we can make steps towards overcoming myths that stigmatise.

Hietanen, Rokka and Schouten (2014) have recently highlighted the potential of expressive videography. This moves beyond films as a representational tool to "a powerful transformative tool in the production and shaping of social relations" (p. 2020). This shift is important from a critical marketing perspective as it opens up the opportunity for critiquing cultural representations. Arguably, some of films mentioned above are already exhibiting transformative potential and we encourage future work to do the same.

In terms of methodological challenges, videography can be associated with the "unconscious emotional manipulation" (Belk and Kozinets, 2005, p. 133-4) of the audience, which is heightened by the visceral and sensory aspects of representation. This is particularly relevant within the context of consumer vulnerability given the potential for emotionally intense stories of illness, poverty, stigmatisation and marginalisation. Another key concern for researchers drawing on visual approaches is to ensure that visual interpretations and productions do not harm participants. When working with images associated with vulnerability the potential for stigmatisation is clear, for example, Fink and Lomax (2014) suggest that images of child poverty can become 'othered' because of the narrow, one-dimensional view they often depict. Images have a permanence and often resurface years after their original production when they are employed for different purposes. This points to another challenge related to the fluidity of interpretations. Again Fink and Lomax's (2014) work on images of child poverty offers some useful advice. They suggest that semiotic readings of photographs must be combined with "the structure of feeling in which photographs are produced." In other words analysis of images should not be divorced from broader cultural narratives and dominant discourses of the time as images "become repositories for our own anxieties and those of society more broadly."

## Conclusions

The above has offered brief discussion of three less commonly seen methodologies, which offer much value to the study of consumer vulnerability in terms of prioritising the voices of consumers experiencing vulnerability. This chapter has particularly highlighted the significance of “found” or secondary data, for example the use of documentary and autobiography, of visual and storied representations, and of working with participants to create change through action research. These approaches offer not just scope for insight but an opportunity to critically analyse and represent the wider ideologies and discourses which structure experiences of vulnerability in the marketplace.

Whether or not studies of vulnerability are by their nature *critical* is a matter for debate. Yet it is certainly true that studies of poverty, race, gender, class, illness and natural disaster critique norms, highlight ignorance and implicate wider market structures (Baker 2009, Hamilton 2012, Hill et al 2015, Visconti, 2016). Yet a critical reading of extant representations of vulnerability might highlight that the agentic assumptions are at work in much of our representations (Fitchett et al 2014). The problem-solving orientation of many academics leads to papers that focus on how the vulnerable cope and are resilient, and in this we may be guilty of averting our gaze from the powerlessness of some consumers and the structuring forces that perpetuate disempowerment. Indeed, there is opportunity for studies of consumer vulnerability to more effectively contextualise the micro level experiences of vulnerability and consumer coping to consider meso and macro forces that structure the lives of consumers. We are not proposing a move away from the lived experience, (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) but recognising the importance of the “systemic and structuring influences of market and social systems” (p. 381). If, as Askegaard and Linnet (2011) suggest, research movements can be seen as a reaction to dominant paradigms then studies of consumer vulnerability and transformative consumer research and more widely could do more to provide an alternative to the reflexive and agentic consumer.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Future research can usefully borrow from critical marketers to develop a stronger critical voice for Transformative Consumer Research and studies of consumer vulnerability (cf. Hein et al 2016). For example, a programme of research could be developed around poverty, consumerism and neoliberalism to explore economic disadvantage at the level of individual experience, with consideration of macro-social structuring forces.

In terms of telling stories, there is space for further researcher reflexivity in both our process and our publications (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009). For example, if we acknowledge the gulfs and similarities between our experiences and those of our informants/participants we are better equipped to represent them.

In order to bridge some of the divide between academic merit and social impact we encourage journals, editors and reviewers to allow space in journal articles for authors to outline the value and impact of their research to the population (or phenomenon) under investigation. This is common practice in applying for research grants but is less commonly seen in published work. Allowing discussion of impact, even in highly theorised accounts, will encourage more researchers to consider the value of their work to the individuals who provide the data on which it is based.

A key aspect to the action research discussed here is the interventionist nature of this approach. This speaks directly to policy developments and interventions, and there are many possibilities for developing research projects in collaboration with practitioner engagement. The ongoing nature of the input of the participants in the community work, and also the ability to build in to the research design some longitudinal component, would be very appealing in contexts where there are deep and wide-reaching effects of a social problem. Examples might include programmes aimed at improving

access to healthy food in areas of economic deprivation; initiatives aimed at reducing alcohol consumption among vulnerable groups, for example underage drinkers; and financial services initiatives aimed at specific vulnerable groups, such as those living on low incomes. Such social problems would benefit from a comprehensive research approach, involving representation of community stakeholders in the evidence gathering about the design of change initiatives. Ultimately, such whole community action approaches are likely to lead to more impactful and meaningful results, with the power to effect change.

In terms of visual research, the study of representations of consumer vulnerability is in its infancy and there is much scope to further develop this line of inquiry, in particular, it would be useful to explore how various states of consumer vulnerability are represented in the media. We suggest that future marketing research could take inspiration from our colleagues in sociology and social sciences who have investigated the meanings of deprivation and disadvantage portrayed in media reporting (Fink and Lomax, 2014; Mooney, 2011). For example, Mooney (2011) discusses the sensationalist nature of “poverty porn”:

“Together with the expressions of middle class fear and distrust of poor people, there is also a fascination with poverty and the supposedly deviant lifestyles of those affected – where viewers are encouraged to find the worst and weakest moments of people’s lives funny and entertaining. This is offered up for consumption on a wider, cross-class basis – yet it is clear that it reflects middle class antipathies and angst” (Mooney, 2011, p.7).

Adopting a critical marketing perspective could add a welcome dimension to this debate – how are the consumption decisions of those experiencing vulnerability depicted? What do we learn about service interactions for consumers in poverty/other vulnerable states? How do these representations compare with existing theoretical perspectives? How do consumers understand and respond to these images? How do consumers experiencing vulnerability answer back to these discourses?

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